

The Silent Drug Crisis in Islamabad's Youth

By **Dr. Muhammad Anees Akram** - November 1, 2024



Picture source - Reuters

Once I read a quote that addiction is a disease that makes you too selfish to see the havoc you create or care about the people whose lives you shatter. Islamabad, presenting a view and serenity, silently battles an emerging crisis: drug addiction. Largely hidden beneath the polished streets and green landscapes, this crisis finds its way to the lives of youngsters who are students or residents. The drugs such as "Ice" (crystal meth), MDMA, Charas and Cocaine have alarmingly found their way into communities, in particular among students, where access has reached unprecedented levels. My recent study about the spatial pattern of drug addiction in Islamabad brings out the sad fact that addiction has acquired endemic proportions. The findings of the Survey indicate that 8% of youth in Islamabad are reported to be addicted to various kinds of substances, wherein "Ice" or crystal meth accounted for 30% of drug-related cases among students. This issue is no longer confined to being just an individual problem but has transformed into a great public health crisis linked to geographical and psychological factors, social problems, and increased accessibility of drugs. Notably, 75% of respondents in my study indicated that they had easy access to drugs within a radius of 1 km from their educational institutions. [Buy vitamins and supplements](#)

The problem is more concentrated in center of Islamabad. The drug is highly available within walking distance in the main city areas and katchi-abadis of Islamabad, which attracts the younger generation, particularly the students, in an effort to flee into a 'high' from the stressors in their lives. Such addiction-prone zones reflect not just physical spaces but unmet mental health needs, strained family relationships economic stresses, and social stresses faced by the youth in Islamabad. The tales we uncover, which include that of 19-year-old Sara- whose name has been changed to protect her privacy-outline the difficulties of youths these days. Sara, being a student, plunged into "Ice addiction" due to depression and the struggles of an extreme academic lifestyle. For her, substances were an escape-temporarily relieving her, until it all spiraled out of control. She is not an isolated case but rather part of a fast-spreading trend in which students, unable to keep up with the stress of

academics and the speed of social interaction, seek their comfort in substances and find themselves entangled in addiction.

There is practically no overemphasizing the fact that addiction risk and mental health go hand in hand. Indeed, our research has documented that a student having mental problems can increase succumbing to addiction by almost threefold. Yet, services to address such needs are scant in Islamabad, with the largest gaps in those very areas where needs tend to be higher. Counseling, therapy, and mental support are also not easily accessible or stigmatized, which means there is hardly any option of getting constructive help for vulnerable youth. Lacking these necessary supports, young people facing depression, anxiety, and other issues are all the more vulnerable to succumbing to substance use as a coping action. This support gap underlines the dire need for access to adapted mental health services among youth, especially students. When students lack healthy outlets for their mental health issues, they are left to their own devices to battle these issues and are at risk of falling into substance abuse.

Adding to that, many young people become embroiled with the process of the law. Our findings show that many young people who become embroiled in the process of the law are further driven toward addiction, not merely as a coping strategy but in response to stigma, stress, and isolation that often characterize legal adversities. This becomes a vicious cycle where legal complications and addiction feed each other—sketching a very grim reality in which the youth of Islamabad find themselves caught in a trap between the consequences and the allure of substances that promise to take their burden away, even if it is temporary. We spoke to many young people who described how legal issues led to addiction: For many, drug use initially seemed a minor, personal respite from overwhelming stress. It quickly became all-consuming and a problem in and of itself, adding depth to their problems.

Effectively addressing addiction requires a comprehensive, multi-layered approach. Recently, the government has collaborated with the Anti-Narcotics Force to establish several rehabilitation centers across Pakistan, supplementing the support available in public hospitals to provide rehabilitation and treatment services for addiction. However, these facilities are limited and insufficient to meet the growing demand, especially for the youth, including school-aged individuals who need accessible and affordable support. Expanding these centers to provide not only detoxification but also continued mental health support, counseling, and job training is essential for helping youth reintegrate into society. Beyond treatment, educational institutions should initiate awareness programs focusing on prevalent drugs like crystal meth ("Ice") to inform students, dispel myths, and reduce the appeal of experimentation. By creating safe environments for students to discuss such issues, educators and counselors can detect early signs of substance use and mental health struggles, addressing them proactively. Additionally, controlling drug access in Islamabad demands tighter border security, stringent drug laws, and robust monitoring systems to disrupt supply chains. Limiting the availability of illegal drugs will, in turn, decrease the likelihood of addiction among young people.

Hand-in-hand with this stricter border control, the government also needs to revisit regulations concerning the sale of alcohol. Though under the present scheme permits to sell alcohol are issued in Christian communities, much more stringent policing and regulation are required to prevent their misuse and access by others.

The free flow of alcohol, mostly illegally diverted, helps to perpetuate the dangerous culture of substance abuse that is taking a hold in the city. Not allowing the misuse of permits for alcohol and regularly undertaking review, including updating regulations, will avoid access to alcohol by those who should not have it, particularly underage individuals.

A multidimensional approach involving treatment, prevention, and regulation is essential to make Islamabad safer for its youth. This requires expanding public rehabilitation centers, conducting

school-based awareness programs, tightening border security, and enforcing stricter alcohol laws. Communities, families, and educators must also step up, supporting early detection and reducing stigma around substance abuse. By fostering awareness, resilience, and proactive support, Islamabad can shift its narrative from hidden addiction to a hopeful path of recovery, empowering its young people to lead lives free from addiction.

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